A final walk with Olds

The man regarded by many as the literary voice of Dunedin left a legacy of dark, moody poems laying bare his life in the city. **BY THOMAS McLEAN**

On August 31, while most of us were anticipating the appearance of a rare blue moon, the poet Peter Olds died. Olds was for many years a familiar face and literary voice around Dunedin. In February last year, a plaque in his honour was added to the Writers' Walk, a necklace of literary recognition that rounds the inner path of the Octagon. It was well deserved.

Peter Olds was born in Christchurch in 1944. While he was still a child, his father became a Methodist minister and moved the family to Milton, then Dunedin, and finally Auckland.

Olds left school at 16 and became a Herne Bay V8 boy, filling odd jobs and shifting from town to town. He met the poet James K Baxter in Dunedin in 1966. The relationship was an important one, and Olds began to take writing more seriously. His poems soon appeared in student magazines, and a one-act play was performed in Dunedin and Wellington.

Olds came to national prominence in the 1970s with a flurry of poetry pamphlets and an appearance (alongside Sam Hunt, Bill Manhire and others) in the influential volume, *The Young New Zealand Poets*. It was a time when, as writer and fellow poet Victor Billot has noted, poets could be rock stars. Olds' star status was confirmed in 1973, when the singer Tom Paxton cancelled a show at the Christchurch Town Hall, and Olds, David Mitchell, Ian Wedde and other young poets filled in, performing their works to a large, enthusiastic audience.

Light and dark: Peter Olds c1970.

Olds battled addiction and mental illness, and fewer poems appeared in the 1980s and 90s. But he returned to prominence in the 2000s with a steady stream of new works. The language of these later poems could still be colloquial and street-smart, but there was often a more reflective aspect as well.

Other admirers of Olds' work can better recount his influence on New Zealand literature over the past 50 years, or describe the magic of his public readings. What I can add is perhaps some insight into the skill and artistry of one of his best works.

I teach a class on poetry at the University of Otago, and every year I include Olds' *Walking down Elder Street*. I read it when it appeared in *Landfall* in 2005, shortly after I moved to New Zealand, and it immediately struck me as a memorable and evocative poem. Eighteen years and many classes later, I wonder if it's the great Dunedin poem – or at least the great Dunedin poem of its era. It captures the city in all of its grimy and wonderful reality, just at the point when gentrification was transforming it into something different.

Olds' poem takes its structure from a 200-year-old source, the "conversation poems" of British Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and John Keats.

These are poems of memory and reflection: the speaker has an experience – revisits a familiar setting (like Tintern Abbey), hears the song of a favourite bird (like a nightingale) – that awakens feelings from the past. He or she reflects on these past experiences, usually moving through a number of different memories or emotions, then at the end returns to the present moment, usually a little clearer, if not happier, for the mental journey. It's the ouroboros of the poetry world.

EXPLORING THE GRITTY

Of course, Olds doesn't sound like Wordsworth or Keats. Like many poets who came of age in the second half of the 20th century, he forsakes the regular meter and rhyme of traditional poetry and embraces the free verse first popularised by Walt Whitman, later reimagined by the Beat Poets, especially Allen Ginsberg, and made even more

personal by poets such as Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell: works that explored the gritty side of the city as well as the loneliness of contemporary society. Like Hone Tūwhare and Cilla McQueen, Olds took these overseas influences and made something quintessentially Kiwi.

In *Walking down Elder Street*, the poet – now an elder himself – returns to the Dunedin street where he once lived, and a flood of vivid scenes and unsavoury characters from the past come to life. As one would expect from an Olds poem, the memories are a mix of the touching and beautiful with the ugly and repellent. In the closing lines he follows a pitch-perfect description of seeing the misty, autumnal peninsula "through the poplars from the French door" with an alarming image of a drunken body. And the detail: I think anyone who has lived in these ozone-thin latitudes knows what he means by a "sun-knifed room".

Is it a dark poem? I suppose so. After all, this is Dunedin. Reflecting on his time as the 1978 Robert Burns Fellow at the University of Otago, Olds writes, "nothing was the same again". But he immediately follows this admission of literary fame with the saddest (and perhaps most insightful) line in the poem: "The best friend I had was when I had nothing." Maybe public recognition isn't all that helpful to good art, or a happy life.

But it's also a poem of resilience. David Eggleton, a former NZ Poet Laureate, called Olds "the laureate of the marginalised", words that are printed on his plaque, and it certainly fits this poem. The landlord, Keyhole Stan, may have ended his days pathetic and alone, but even he is blessed with a circle of castaways who remember him "fondly", despite his faults. And it's a funny poem. When the Dunedin City Council is looking for a new motto, Olds has it: "Dunedin. A city of psychiatric clinics, pubs and bookstores ..."

To breathe new life into an old verse form; to make it feel personal and universal; to capture something of Dunedin, and all the while make it look like an effortless achievement: the poet capable of such things only comes around once in a blue moon. ▮

Thomas McLean is an associate professor in English at the University of Otago.
Walking down Elder Street *is reprinted with permission from* You Fit the Description: The Selected Poems of Peter Olds. *A selection of Peter Olds' unpublished and uncollected poems,* The Glass Guitar, *will be published on October 24.*

Walking down Elder Street

for Inma Llorens

Dropping down the steps from Heriot Row into Elder Street,
Knox Church and Dunedin North spread out like a tray
of hot cross buns — to *Number 10* where I lived and wrote
for five years in the late '70s and early '80s,
watched over by Keyhole Stan, the landlord,
who had a penchant for factory girls and mental patients
and knew how to screw the system.
A rooming-house supreme.
A kind of sheltered workshop for poets and strays.
Dunedin. A city of psychiatric clinics, pubs and bookstores ...

On Sunday mornings at 10am I'd know exactly where my parents were.
My mother in her homespun jacket and gloves. My father
in his sky-blue suit and dog-collar
looking up into some dark rafter squeezing out
a Wesleyan hymn somewhere in the Bay of Plenty.
And I, turning over in my sun-knifed room, wrapped
in pill bottles and grimy sheets sweat
the shit of the condemned.
Up all night grinding teeth on Doriden writing laments
to friends who drown in vomit of methadone and beer
at the cross-roads of the Greatest Little Bar in Aotearoa.

I wrote a lot but in the end had little to show for it.
Being a mental patient gave you an excuse to piss around.
I took a cheap room. Got lucky. Had a benefit-grant for as long
as I stuck to the pills and bashed out the odd inoffensive poem.
I scored the Burns Fellowship. After that
nothing was the same again.
The best friend I had was when I had nothing.

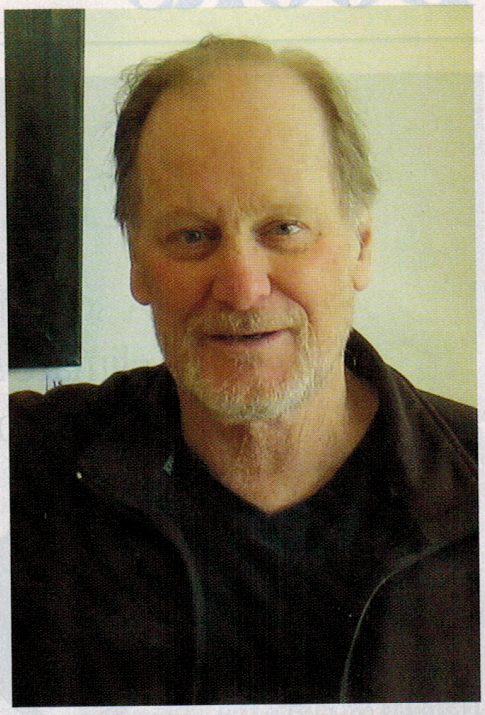
Who cares if elderberries ever grew here or where the street's name came from!
Hydrangeas and spiders and wild roses are what I remember.
There was a brewery here once and stables across the road
beyond the chestnuts and white gravel drive.
There was a bashed-up Mark 3 Zephyr leaning against the concrete curb.
There were memorable parties at the Entwistles'.
From the top of the steps
Signal Hill still looks like a nineteenth century etching.

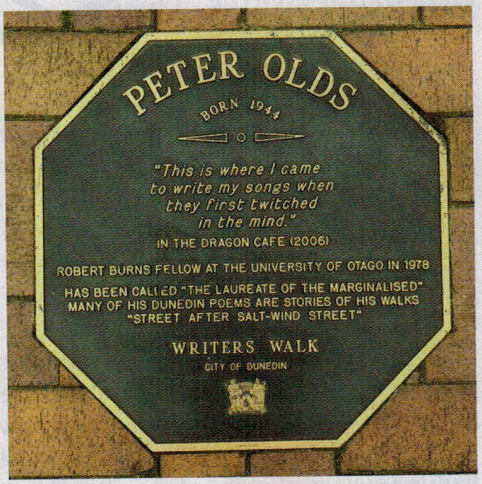
I inherited a piano from a former tenant —
it made my guitar sound good.
A kitchen table jammed in a corner of the room
served as a writing desk.
Stan fixed me up with a bookcase —
let me pin my Renoirs and Van Goghs on the wall.
With the Burns money I bought a desk-lamp and typewriter.
I still have the typewriter.

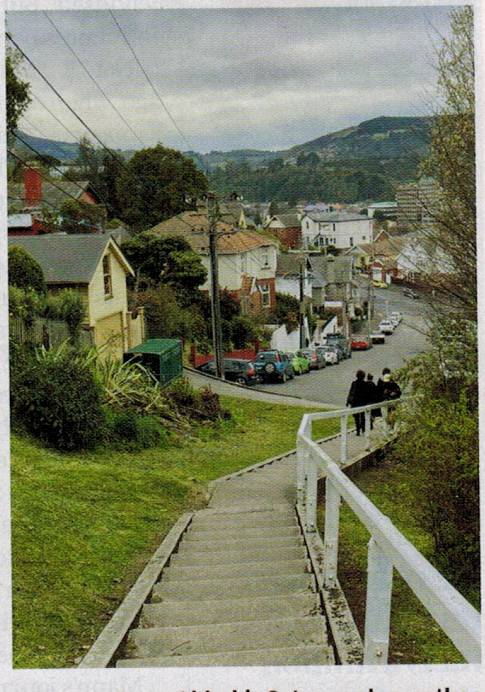
An ex-jockey, Ned Kelly, I shared the kitchen with
taught me how to ride a legless horse and take a shot to the head.
He wrote the best rugby ballads around but never published.
Sipped his beer in small glasses.
Smoked only when he drank.
And as for Keyhole Stan, he got by on huge plates of steamed vegetables
latenight prowling and violating tenants' washing —
rode about town in left-hand drive convertibles and dyed black hair
puffing like a Hollywood pimp,
eventually kicking the bucket at eighty-three alone on the floor
of his wash house ... Left no children
but fondly remembered by
Elvis Crawford,
Ding Dong Bell,
Pillfreak Olds,
Milkbottle O'Kane,
In & Out Hone,
Spanish Lucy,
Ned Kelly.

I shifted North to get off pills and psychiatric.
Caught the last NZR bus out of the city ...
I soon missed the view of the peninsula
through the poplars from the French door.
I could stand there for hours in autumn
mesmerized by the fog rolling off the dark brown hills.
I missed opening the door of my room to the main body of the house
and finding a near-dead drunk on the floor
half in, half out of the bathroom clutching a set of bloody false teeth
to his chest. Out cold. Beaten up. A black frost
blowing through the wide open back door and up the filthy passageway
inviting anyone who wants to, to walk in ...

In the end
students took over —
They're less trouble, the new landlord said.




PETER OLDS
BORN 1944
"This is where I came to write my songs when they first twitched in the mind."
IN THE DRAGON CAFE (2006)
ROBERT BURNS FELLOW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO IN 1978
HAS BEEN CALLED "THE LAUREATE OF THE MARGINALISED"
MANY OF HIS DUNEDIN POEMS ARE STORIES OF HIS WALKS
"STREET AFTER SALT-WIND STREET"
WRITERS WALK
CITY OF DUNEDIN



From top: Peter Olds; his Octagon plaque; the steps connecting Heriot Row and Elder St. Top left: Olds outside his Elder St flat.

THOMAS McLEAN; ANNA UTTING; GRUTNESS